

May 2, 2023

Subject: Cost-Effective Ways to Increase Preschool Access through Outdoor Preschool Licensure (HB 2717-1)

Dear Joint Ways and Means Committee,

We are a group of advocates asking for your support on House Bill 2717-1 to establish Outdoor Preschool Licensure. The following points illustrate why **HB 2717-1 is a cost-effective option for the state, providers, and families that expand childcare across the state.**

State:

1. Outdoor preschool licensure is a cost-effective way for Oregon to expand access to preschool throughout the state. State licensing will create opportunities for outdoor preschool programs to leverage federal and local funding, including Preschool Promise, [Community Childcare Initiative](#), work quality improvement system and quality recognition programs, Multnomah County's Preschool for All program, tribal funds for childcare, DELC grants like capacity expansion grants, and extended ERDC hours.
2. Outdoor preschools have long waitlists and are an increasingly popular option among families. Allowing families to choose outdoor preschool can help fill slots for subsidized programs like Preschool Promise and Preschool for All.

Providers:

1. Outdoor preschool licensure gives providers more insurance options.
2. Licensure offers alternative options in areas where indoor facilities appropriate for childcare are hard to find because of high rent or limited infrastructure. Outdoor preschools provide an alternative safe and high-quality option.
3. Licensure opens up training and funding currently unavailable to recorded programs, such as the [Betty Gray Scholarship](#) and [Education Awards](#).
4. Outdoor preschool licensed providers can access higher education opportunities, which opens up more options for their training and ORO status.

Families:

1. Families can access childcare subsidies for outdoor programs, providing them with a cost-effective option for preschool. In addition, it meets Oregon's priority to offer more options for families.

Benefits of outdoor preschool

1. [Children benefit from outdoor preschool](#) through social and emotional learning, rich sensory experiences, and opportunities for building confidence, curiosity, and problem-solving skills.
2. Outdoor play [improves sleep in children ages two to five](#), and we know that better sleep can enhance brain development for children.
3. Outdoor preschool increases self-regulation and executive functioning skills
4. To learn more about what outdoor preschool is and its plethora of benefits, please review our [website](#) or the attached summary document.

In summary, outdoor preschool licensure is a cost-effective way to increase preschool access throughout Oregon. It provides opportunities for leveraging funding, insurance for providers, workforce development, higher education options for providers, and childcare subsidies for families. We urge you to support HB 2717-1.

Sincerely,

[Outdoor Early Learning Alliance of Oregon](#)

Our mission is to promote policy changes in Oregon that result in a path to licensure for outdoor preschools, creating equitable and accessible opportunities for all families.

Supporters from the [Children's Agenda](#) include:

Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, Oregon Relief Nurseries, Friends of Outdoor School, Oregon Environmental Council, FACT Oregon, ReadyNation, Oregon Resource Family Alliance, Pro-Choice Oregon, Oregon Kids Read, Immigrant & Refugee Community Organization (IRCO), The Oregon Primary Care Association, Clackamas Women's Services, Community Action Team, Reach Out and Read Northwest, Prevent Child Abuse Oregon, Oregon Attorney General's Sexual Assault Task Force, Children's Institute, Catholic Community Services of the Mid-Willamette Valley, Oregon School-Based Health Alliance, Oregon CASA Network

Other early childhood supporters include:

Lynny Brown, Oregon Health and Outdoors Initiative, Willamette Partnership
lynny@willamettepartnership.org

Ryder Talcott
Owner, Programs Director- Maverick Outdoors LLC.,
Mini Mavericks Preschool
info@minimaverickspreschool.com

Kendal Sweeney
Owner, Preschool Director- Maverick Outdoors LLC., Mini Mavericks Preschool
info@minimaverickspreschool.com

Rachel Turner
Director, Hazelwood Outdoor Kindergarten
hazelwoodrachel@gmail.com

Heather Mayer
Director, Lucky Ducklings Preschool
heather.michelle.mayer@gmail.com

Amy Nelson
Teacher, Maple Grove Nature School

amy@outdooredadventures.com

Heidi Hoskins
Director, Maple Grove Nature School
heidi@outdooredadventures.com

Nicole Fravel
Owner, Wildwood Nature School
nfravel@wildwoodnatureschool.com

Dezire Clarke Meindersee
Owner, Cedar Tree Learning
cedartreelearning@gmail.com

Elia Gilbert
Forest Kindergarten Teacher, Acorn Waldorf School
Nature-based Teaching Mentor, The Neighboring Tree Project
Elia@acornws.org

Joe Madden
Forest Kindergarten Assistant Teacher, Green Meadow Waldorf School
jmadden@gmws.org

Shannon Coker
Lead Teacher
Mind-Full Meadows Nature Preschool
Shannon@mind-fulleducation.com

Andrea Davey
Owner, Little Root Children
littlerootchildren@gmail.com

Heidi Mckay
Executive Director
<https://downtoearthforestschool.com>

Joseph Flaherty
Director
Art and Science Kids
artandsciencekids.com

Jenny Calhoun
Early Childhood Teacher
jenny.calhoun@eugenewaldorf.org
Amber Ankrum
Owner/Teacher at Elements Nature School
Elementsnatureschool@gmail.com

Laurel Loughran (she/her)
Office and Admissions | Waldorf Teacher Education
Eugene
laurelwtee@gmail.com | wtee.org

Samantha Dorsch (she/her)
Owner/Teacher at Under the Trees Forest Preschool
sammi@underthetreesforestpreschool.com

WHY DOES OREGON NEED LICENSED OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL?

2022



WILLAMETTE PARTNERSHIP

Photo by Ben Wicks, Unsplash

Outdoor Preschool is...

Outdoor preschool is a preschool that meets either entirely or primarily outside. Also called “forest kindergartens,” this model has been around for decades and offers children the unique health benefits of time in nature along with the skills your kid needs to succeed in school. Many of the [physical, cognitive, and social development benefits](#) are unique from those in a traditional indoor environment.

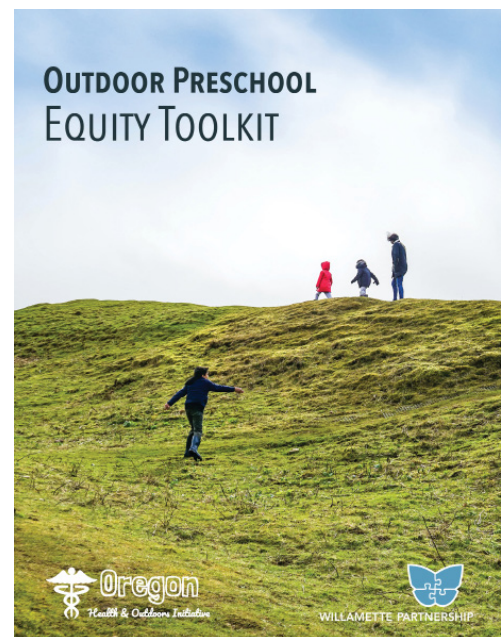
Licensed Outdoor Preschool is

Accessible

It’s official: [there’s a severe shortage of preschool options](#) in Oregon. There’s currently only capacity to serve [1 in every 5 young children](#) who need child care throughout the state, and with physical space for child care centers limited, outdoor preschool provides an alternative that could help close that gap.

Providing a path to licensure for outdoor preschools would allow existing outdoor preschools to operate for full days and serve more children. It would help increase the state’s capacity for child care by offering an alternative, accessible option for parents who need full-day care but are currently unable to access it.

Licensure also means low-income families and children enrolled in services such as Early Intervention will have access to outdoor preschool through subsidized systems that provide financial support, personalized coaching, and resources to the child’s learning experience. Currently, many funding avenues and resources are unavailable to nonlicensed programs. Licensure offers equal access to outdoor educational spaces that will better support and empower children, families, and their caregivers.



Outdoor Preschool Equity Toolkit,
Willamette Partnership

Licensed Outdoor Preschool is

Affordable

In Oregon, the average annual cost of child care [is over \\$14,000](#), twice as expensive as public university tuition. Though both the state and federal governments offer childcare subsidies and waivers to help offset the costs of childcare, [less than 1 in 5 Oregon children who qualify are actually enrolled in programs that accept these subsidies](#). When combined with the shortage of available preschool options throughout the state, many Oregon families aren’t able to find an affordable solution to childcare, and our kids are the ones being left behind.



Photo by Bambi Corro, Unsplash

Outdoor preschools operate without the high costs associated with building rent and maintenance, utilities, etc. Lower building expenses mean that outdoor preschools can invest more money where it really matters: on hiring and retaining quality teachers and instructors to help facilitate your child's early learning.

Licensed Outdoor Preschool is **Equitable**

Offering parents the power to choose where to send their children for preschool is a matter of equity. While several outdoor preschools already operate around the state, they aren't able to meet licensure requirements that were specifically designed with indoor spaces in mind. (For example, it's hard to ensure there aren't insects in the child's play area when the play area is a forest!)

No licensure option means these preschools can only operate for half days, and they are unable to accept state or federal child care resources or apply for programs like [Preschool Promise](#) or [Preschool for All](#). This translates to outdoor preschools in Oregon being unavailable for families who rely on these programs, or who need to work full days and are unable to afford only half-day care.

Outdoor experiences are good for children's physical, cognitive, and social development in ways that are unique from a traditional indoor environment. Yet many families lack access to outdoor and nature-based experiences, and these inequities often fall across socioeconomic and racial lines. By licensing outdoor preschools, we're creating equitable and accessible opportunities for all families.

What's the Solution?

In 2017, Washington [passed SB 5357](#). The bill successfully established a four-year pilot project during which outdoor preschools operated for full days while working with state agencies and lawmakers to establish a path to licensure for outdoor preschools. In 2021, Washington became the first in the nation to permanently license outdoor, nature-based child care for preschool and school-age children under [SB 5151](#). These bills addressed the same regulatory challenges that Oregon outdoor preschools face, and so we propose that Oregon pass an analogous bill or explore other policy pathways to licensure in 2023.



Children learn, play, and spend nearly 100% of their time outside at Tygh Valley Head Start, Mid-Columbia Children's Council.

Outdoor Preschool Licensure is supported by the Outdoor Early Learning Alliance of Oregon (OELAO). OELAO's mission is to promote policy changes in Oregon that result in a path to licensure for outdoor preschools, creating equitable and accessible opportunities for all families.

For more information or to join our Alliance, please email
Lynny Brown, *Partner, Health & Nature*, Willamette Partnership
lynny@willamettepartnership.org

